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ABSTRACT

This paper advocates a pragmatist approach to teaching the composition of academic discourse. It discusses teaching directly the conflicting positions of academic discourse as elitist jargon or as key to advanced conceptualization. The suggested pedagogical method involves the examination of academic discourse in general, and the procedure of having each student investigate the discursive practices of his or her particular major. It concludes that: (1) the primary concern of students was what they perceived as the implied submissiveness of the audience to academic discourse; (2) engaging students in the conflict encouraged them to confront and understand the difficulties they felt; and (3) through their engagement in and representation of this conflict, students were taught to utilize and participate in academic discourse. Contains 20 references. (EF)

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# A Pragmatist Approach to Academic Discourse: Teaching the Conflict over "Stuffy B.S."

by Donald Jones

Contemporary composition theorists have a love/hate relationship with academic discourse. We often argue that either academic writing should not be taught at all or that it should be the only discourse taught in first-year writing courses. Over the last three decades, the pendulum has swung from Ken Macrorie who rejected the instruction of "a dehydrated, academic tongue" (vii) to David Bartholomae who insisted that learning "to speak our [academic] discourse" must be the central mission of college composition ("Inventing" 134). And with each swing of the pendulum, one extreme has been deemed completely correct then entirely wrong.

Macrorie's rejection of academic writing led to the exclusion of published authors from many composition classrooms in the 1970's. Then James Vopat was one of the first to criticize Macrorie's approach because he believed it taught students to write "well and excitedly about their personal experiences" yet left them "at a loss when asked to write about ideas" (42). The pendulum then swung to the other extreme as Bartholomae's concentration on academic discourse led him to be "dismissive" towards any personal writing by students ("Response" 85). Patricia Bizzell, however, has asked whether this concentration on the university's discourse has made instructors "only more efficient enforcers of academic norms" who eliminate "stylistic diversity in student writing" (227). And Bizzell has even reconsidered her own advocacy of teaching academic discourse by doubting whether it fosters critical consciousness as she originally had assumed. If these pendulum swings are starting to make you feel a bit dizzy, then imagine our students' responses. If we are so conflicted about academic discourse, then how can we expect

our students to be comfortable with its composition?

For many first-year students, academic discourse is an elusive concept; it's something they are expected to know, yet many just can't quite grasp. When I began to notice that students were not only uncertain of the formal conventions but also wary of the fundamental purposes of academic discourse, I began to discuss this issue with them directly. Yet many of their responses made me wish, at first, that I had never broached this subject.

Once students realized I really wanted to hear their opinions, they told me that academic discourse was "the stuffy b.s. students use to impress their profs" and it felt like "going through all the right motions [but feeling] only numb." These two comments are representative of many students in multiple sections at two different institutions. Fortunately, a few students defended academic discourse as "a more efficient, more accurate language" and "a challenge to students . . [to] make them seek greater meanings." Yet many others used disturbing metaphors to express their doubts, such as by making comparisons to "joining a club and leaving others outside" and "being in a fashion show where you use words to flaunt yourself." These comments reveal the frustrations too many students feel about the ends and means of academic discourse. What is harder for me to capture on paper is the anger and the excitement in the students' voices as they finally had a chance to confront this subject. And it is the students' emotions as well as their insights that have convinced me that another approach towards teaching students to compose academic discourse is possible.

Similar to Gerald Graff's approach to the cultural wars over the literary canon, I began teaching this conflict over academic discourse explicitly, but as I will show, it is the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey as much as Graff's pedagogy that has showed me how to engage the students *in* this conflict rather than just teach this controversy *to* them.

For John Dewey, the development of knowledge begins with the primacy of experience. Because experience is the "starting point of . . . [critical] thought" for this pragmatist philosopher, I began by eliciting the students' previous encounters with and present beliefs about academic discourse (*Experience* 11). I tried to signal my willingness to hear their confusions and frustrations with this widely used but rarely examined concept by assigning a short text which describes a very able student's difficulties with composing academic discourse. In "If You Want to be a Scholar" by Howard Becker, the student decides her assumption that academic discourse only consists of using "big words" to impress others is erroneous. Although this students realizes that its composition "is part of every . . . students' socialization," she still admits that she "personally finds scholarly writing boring" (795). This conflict between required activity and personal feeling is a good example of a "felt difficulty" which, according to Dewey, can lead one from experience to knowledge (*How* 107). Yet as these moments of physical need, emotional desire, or intellectual curiosity prompt what Dewey terms the constructive process of knowing, greater agency can be achieved only if language's influence upon thought is acknowledged.

My pragmatist approach to academic discourse proceeds on two parallel tracks: the first consists of having the entire class examine academic discourse in general and the second involves having each student investigate the discursive practices of his or her particular major. The common examination includes reading and responding to abridged versions of Peter Elbow's "Reflections on Academic Discourse" and David Bartholmae's "Inventing the University" as well as shorter excerpts from Nancy Sommers and Mike Rose. I presented that learning sequence at last year's conference, and an extended version of that paper has been submitted for publication. Therefore, I now would like to present the second more individualized inquiry which asks upper-level students to investigate the discourse of their

particular majors. I will refer not only to Dewey and Graff, but also to Michel Foucault and Mikhail Bakhtin in order to explain this pedagogy, and I will provide excerpts from the work of three exemplary students whom I will call Jeff, Jessie, and Keith.

The primary question of this investigation is "What are the benefits and the disadvantages of your acquisition of the academic discourse of your particular discipline?" Yet this large question overwhelms most students so, to help the students get started, I follow Dewey's principle of the primacy of experience; I initiate these investigations by asking the students to fastwrite in response to several more accessible questions which include "What do the stereotypes about your major suggest about your discipline's ways of thinking, speaking, and writing about its subject?" and " How are your specialized ways of thinking, speaking, and writing about this subject different from another person's general knowledge of it?" One of the three exemplary students, a senior majoring in electrical engineering named Jeff, responded:

> . . . . a few stereotypes jump out immediately. Studying technology makes one a"techno geek," does it not? . . . We in technology are assumed to have a consuming interest in computers as well as the essential information (believed to be a closely held secret) needed to program . . . any VCR. I would guess that it is a widely held belief that we are artistically challenged, verbally handicapped, and socially inept. In one of my favorite cartoons, Dilbert (typical, eh?) demonstrates his conversational abilities with this opening gambit: "I enjoy studying the complexities of Trellis Code Modulation" at which point all conversation vaporizes. ( Butland 12/16/96 p.1)

Of course, Jeff's own VCR joke and diction like "opening gambit" contradict the stereotype that an electrical engineer is "socially inept" and "verbally handicapped," but this exploration of his beliefs led Jeff to the felt difficulty of wondering why these stereotypes exist and whether they suggest the limitations of this discourse.

In order to foster the pragmatist construction of knowledge by Jeff and others, I also required students to go beyond their initial ideas by examining each

discipline's key concepts, typical discourse, and expected competence. Through this examination, I wanted to encourage the students to consider this academic discourse to be not *the* representation of Reality as foundationalists would assume, but *a* particular perspective upon a reality as pragmatists as well as postmodernists would assert. Jeff identified such key concepts as hertz, volts, amperes, and "Trellis Code Modulation" from the Dilbert cartoon (12/16/96 p.1). He offered the following sentence as an example of his academic discourse: "Driving the IRQ line to a logic low level initiates a vectored interrupt" (12/16/96 p.2). He characterized this discourse as "precise . . . , quantitative, and unadorned" because it must fulfill the twin criteria of brevity and verifiability (12/16/96 p.2). According to Jeff, he "slowly came to grasp the discipline's ways of 'knowing, selecting, evaluating, reporting, concluding, and arguing' " (David Bartholomae qtd. 12/16/96 p.3). Thus, he realized that this particular discourse was not a foundational means of communication; it instead taught an influential kind of cognition about this subject. As Jeff stated, "I adopted the 'language' of electricity [through my use of] Thevenin's Theorem [and] Ohm's Law" and "internalizing [these concepts] gave me insights into more complex ideas" (12/16/96 p.3). It is important to note that as Jeff began to engage in Dewey's constructive process of knowing to resolve a felt difficulty, he along with many other students focused on the effects a particular academic discourse had on their knowledge.

The students realized, as both pragmatists and postmodernists insist, that knowledge cannot be divorced from discursive practices. Like Michel Foucault, they often noted the relationships of power reproduced by the privileged discourses of academia, as suggested by the earlier comment about "joining a club and leaving others outside." Yet unlike Foucault in his early work, Jeff especially did not not consider himself to be completely subject to an oppressive discourse. In *The Order of Things* from 1966, for example, Foucault declares that the autonomous individual

"is in the process of perishing as the being of language . . . shine[s] ever brighter on the horizon" (386). And throughout much of his work, Foucault, like other postmodernists, struggles to overcome the "poststructuralist tendency to overlook the power of individual discursive voices" as Sharon Crowley has warned (180). In "The Discourse on Language" from 1971, Foucault also considers language to be "a violence we do to things . . . a practice we impose on them" (229). Jeff, however, defended his academic discourse as a beneficial tool, yet one whose limits must be recognized.

Unlike the other two students Jessie and Keith, Jeff primarily defended the academic discourse of electrical engineering. Given the complexity of "the world today," Jeff explained, "we need that specialized language in order to simplify communication of complex ideas among professionals" (11/20/96 p.1). Jeff realized that his previous reference to "Trellis Code Modulation" may sound like "Greek" to the "typical techno phobe" (12/16/96 p.2), and as Foucault warns, this exclusionary effect could make his discipline seem like an "inaccessible cult" to others (12/16/96 p.1). Yet unlike Dilbert, Jeff knew his academic discourse had "no application outside of a learning or work environment" (12/16/96 p.1). Still he defended this discourse because "without specialized terms we would be unable to describe the physical phenomena we manipulate to make all this technology work" (12/16/96 p.1).

Similar to Foucault and other postmodernists, Dewey probably would want to complicate Jeff's foundational characterization of language as "describ[ing] . . . physical phenomena." For Dewey warns, knowledge cannot be considered "complete and prior to language" so language then can be assumed to convey knowledge like "a pipe conducts water" (*Experience* 141). Language instead must be conceived as central to knowledge because, according to Dewey, "the *ways* in which we believe . . . have a tremendous effect upon *what* we believe" (*Experience*

15). It is the "tremendous effect" of language which made the other two students, Jessie and Keith, less certain of the benefits of learning an academic discourse.

Jessie, a senior music theory major, was much more ambivalent than Jeff; she too realized

> To the general public our language may seem virtually inaccessible; however, . . . . we cannot function without having a way to verbalize our art form. Without this language, one can say very little about the music except how it makes one feel. ( Levine 7)

Yet, from the start, she was much more troubled by the limitations she perceived in this discourse:

> From Bach, [we learn] counterpoints and fugues; from Mozart, musical syntax and sonata form; and from Beethoven, extended harmony and chromaticism. [Yet this canon] leaves out the music of women and African-Americans, labeling it as unsuitable to be taught and learned. (Levine 5)

Keith, a sophomore political science major, was even more dubious. He easily listed "legitimacy, ideology . . . . authority, and nationalism" as some of the key concepts of his discipline. Yet he also quickly asserted what he called the "almost-paradox" that the work of political scientists aspires to be "value-free" yet "many of the terms . . . are value-laden by themselves" (Lamkins 5, 6). And his description of the stereotype of his major was even more disturbing, for he believed many consider it to be

> a very exclusive discourse . . . those who can control and manipulate the discourse can maintain positions of power and authority. [Then] all others, i.e.- the voters, can be spoon-fed watered down versions of this discourse. (3)

As each student began to examine the "tremendous effect" of an academic discourse upon their beliefs, they never considered themselves to be passive subjects who could only occupy fixed discursive positions. Jeff, for example, rejected the notion that "I am radically impoverished because of the limitations of my chosen discipline's discourse" because Jeff was -- again in his own words -- "exposed to

enough alternative discourses to see the flaws and the weaknesses of the one I chose [to major in]" (12/16/96 p.7). Similar to Foucault in his later works, Jeff considered himself to be situated in a complex matrix of more than one discourse rather than fixed by one monolithic language. Discursive practices, as Foucault explains in "The Subject and Power" from 1982, "are multiple; they are superimposed, they cross, . . . [and] sometimes cancel one another out, sometimes reinforce one another" (224). Within this complex matrix, the individual need not be a passive subject. Instead the power of dominant discourses, according to Foucault, "includes an important element: freedom. Power is exercised only over free subjects" (221). Confronted by the multiple and inconsistent demands of the dominant ideology, the subject has the ability, the agency to determine the appropriate response. Although Foucault was never quite able to to consider discourse to be very beneficial, his later work comes close to Dewey's dialectical conception of experience, knowledge, language.

For Dewey too believes "experience is dependent upon an extension of language," yet this rather postmodern sounding statement is immediately followed by the pragmatist assertion that language is "a social product and operation" (*Experience* 143). As a social product, language does have a great effect on the individual, but as a social operation or process, the individual also can have a tremendous impact upon language. Thus, Dewey not only "point[s] out that the self . . . is socially constructed," but he also manages to avoid, as Victor Vitanza cautions, the postmodern "neglect . . . that the social is itself . . . constructed" by its individual members ( 157). Similar to Jeff, Dewey considers language to be the "tool of tools"for understanding not physical phenomena as Jeff stated, but one's experiences and ways of knowing (*Experience* 155). As discursive practices and the beliefs they engender no longer prove to be beneficial, Dewey asserts that all knowledge is "subject to reconsideration and revision" because all "meanings may be infinitely combined and re-arranged in [the] imagination" of individuals (*Experience* 138).

Unlike most postmodernists and even Foucault in his later work, Dewey is much more confident that we are capable of critically examining our ways of believing in order "to see what they are made of and what . . . [they] do to us" (*Experience* 35).

Dewey's dialectical conception of experience, knowledge, and language creates a theoretical explanation for non-foundational agency, but he is very vague on how this critical examination is to be conducted. Yet if Foucault's postmodern method of discourse analysis is separated from his repeated references to the dominant discourses as being entirely oppressive, these methods can be redeployed within Dewey's dialectical framework of non-foundationalism. Then the benefits as well as the drawbacks of a particular discourse can be examined and any necessary revisions can be considered. Following a similar application of Foucault's methods of discursive analysis by Carol Snyder, I also asked the students to consider such questions as "What is the object of this classification system?" and "What does this classification system exclude or overlook?" (see 212-14).

Jeff, Jessie, and Keith's work was exemplary because they were able to answer these demanding questions. Jeff, for example, was able to examine not only his academic discourse's emphasis on the quantitative and the efficient as its primary focus, but also its deflection from the qualitative and the ethical. Quoting one of his electrical engineering professors whom he interviewed as part of this assignment, Jeff asserted that the technical report "is not read to lift anyone's spirits" (12/16/96 p.2). Instead this report is written so "experiments performed are recorded, evaluated, and then reported" (12/16/96 p.2). He then answered the Foucauldian question of "what does this discourse exclude or overlook?" by explaining that his academic discourse omitted "color, depth, excitement, and any sense of emotion" because "descriptive language will not enhance [a] design . . . [it will] merely slow the process. Technical [work] is limited to facts . . . . [in order] to solve problems" (12/16/96 p.4). As Foucault and Dewey both theorize, Jeff demonstrates the ability to

determine the appropriate response within a complex matrix of discourses, for he continued,

> the relentless emphasis on the technical content needs to be tempered with consideration for the human side of life . . . . we focus on 'solving the problem' whatever it is. Our solutions may work . . . . But we also need to appreciate how our solutions will be used" (12/16/96 p.6).

Then Jeff offered the epitome of this greater ethical concern:

> The problem posed to scientists and engineers in the 1940's was how to create a nuclear explosion. Through great insight and hard work, the atomic bomb was created. But did this solution enhance our lives? Robert Oppenheimer . . . later rejected the idea of developing the significantly more powerful hydrogen bomb. Anyone applying technology to solve a problem needs to first ask "is this problem worth solving?" (12/16/96 p.7)

Jeff's ability to question the tenets of his primary academic discourse contradicts the postmodern conclusion repeated by many composition scholars, such as Lester Faigley, that the subject must be considered only "an effect rather than a cause of discourse" (10).

To an even great degree, Keith and Jessie demonstrate the non-foundational agency that students can achieve as they not only considered the consequences of learning an academic discourse but also proposed some improvements on its use and instruction. Similar to Jeff, Keith raised ethical concerns about political discourse without considering it to be entirely negative. He too defended the discourse of his discipline, for it helps one "ask the right question questions" in order to "understand the causes, effects, ways, means, reasons, and results of human interactions in a political context" (Lamkins 4). Yet learning this discourse, Keith realized, could have its disadvantages as well. For students must learn that that the academic terms of any discipline are "just a more convenient way of phrasing concepts," yet he continued that these terms "by no means fully define these concepts" [so we must eliminate] the use of jargon for the purposes of

sounding impressive" (Lamkins 2). The failure to understand fully these terms and their appropriate use risks

> the major disadvantage . . [of] when one gets too engulfed in the . . . concepts of the language and neglects to see the ever-present human aspect that is so crucial to political studies. If the human element is overlooked, one risks becoming the corrupt politician . . . . This ends up defeating the purpose of politics in my mind. It becomes too self-serving. (Lamkins 7)

In order to avoid this misuse, Keith charged both the users and the instructors of academic discourse with a special responsibility: "In retrospect . . . it seems to me that it is not the discourse itself that is necessarily exclusi[onary], but rather those who use it and teach it are responsible for the exclusivity of academic discourse" (Lamkins 1). It is important to note the growth of Keith's understanding of these issues as he realized "in retrospect" that the problem of exclusivity is not so much inherent to the discourse rather it is a matter of its misuse as the humans affected are ignored.

Jessie stressed even more the instructors' responsibility to teach academic discourse well. She opposed the assumption made by some professors that students will learn an academic discourse through through some vague process of osmosis. Jessie offered two telling examples of this assumption. First, she recalled attending a master class in which the visiting scholar advised students that reading one of "the great texts on the basics of music" was the best way to "learn the terms" then practice would take care of the rest (Levine 8). Second, when Jessie went to her advisor to interview him on these issues, he responded that "unless [she, a graduating senior,] wanted [her] acceptance to the masters program revoked . . . [she] should answer the questions [her]self" (Levine 8). "Luckily," she adds, "he agreed with my answers. I guess this means I have succeeded in . . . [being] fully initiated into the 'theory club.' Yet this also proves academia's unwillingness to explain its discourse to students" (Levine 8). Then Jessie, a soon-to-be graduate student and teaching assistant, vowed,

it is "the responsibility of the professor to offer the definitions and [instruction] necessary to utilize [academic] discourses" because students "cannot be expected to learn something not presented to them" (Levine 9). Both students and professors must

> understand the discourse well enough to explain it to someone who does not understand . . . . If one can explain the language to a student or someone else who does not know the discourse, only then have we proved that we are true masters of our academic discourse" (Levine 9).

* * *

Let me conclude quickly that with a few references to Mikhail Bakhtin on how instructors can fulfill our responsibility to teach academic discourses explicitly and why I have found this pragmatist approach to be so effective. I believe that one of the primary reasons many students struggle with academic discourse is because they consider it to be what Bakhtin terms an "authoritative discourse," meaning a language which is to be received and repeated by the audience. Many students hated to write academic discourse because they believed it required them to submit to the opinions imposed by an "authoritative " professor of text. In contrast as Bakhtin explains, "internally persuasive discourse" is "half ours, half someone else's" (345). By directly teaching the conflict over academic discourse as Graff proposes and following Dewey's dialectical conceptions of experience, knowledge, and language, this approach enables students to confront a felt difficulty which they often experience yet rarely are encouraged to articulate and examine. Through their examinations of academic discourse, Jeff, Jessie, and Keith entered Bakhtin's "open forum" in which many competing perspectives on one issue are voiced. In this heteroglossic site, they began to write academic discourse about academic discourse itself as they constructed knowledge that was both "half [theirs]" and "half someone else's." In "internally-persuasive discourse," the students considered not only the drawbacks as Foucault would stress but also the the benefits and possible improvements of academic discourse as Dewey would assert.

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